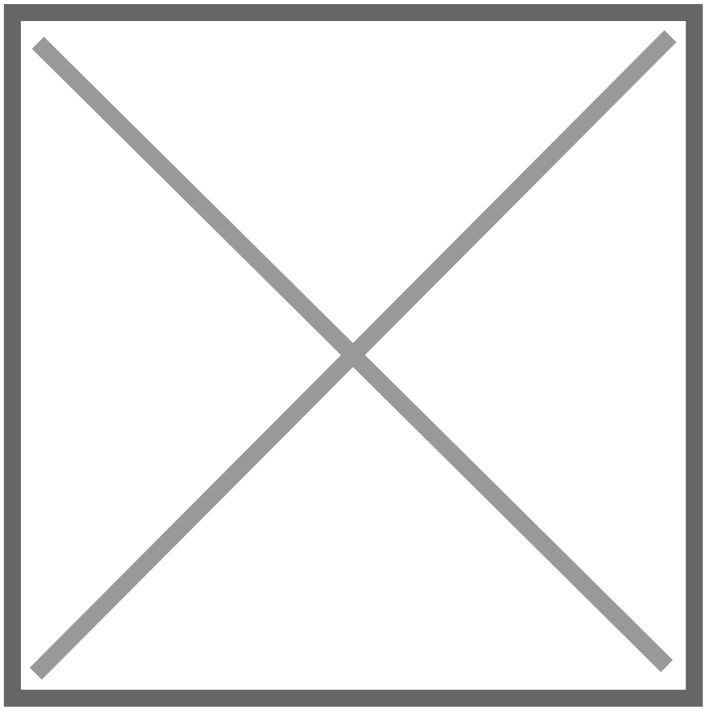
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Towards a Hunger-free India

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On the midnight of August 14-15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru referred to a new dawn in our history and our entering into a tryst with destiny. Being aware that widespread poverty in the country has its roots in agricultural stagnation, Nehru remarked, Ã¢â?¬Å?everything else can wait, but not agricultureÃ¢â?¬?.

This led to several policy and program initiatives such as enlarging the area under assured irrigation, producing the inputs needed by farmers such as seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and farm implements, and above all, strengthening our infrastructure in the field of agricultural research and education. Thanks to these far-sighted steps, we have today a National Agricultural Research System of which we can be proud.

On the midnight of August 14-15, 1997, K R Narayanan, the then President of India, referred to two major achievements of the first 50 years of our Independence. These are: first, our democratic system of governance extending up to the village level leading to the recognition that India represents the world's largest functioning democracy and second, the achievement of our farmers, scientists and policy makers in making the country self reliant in food production. In spite of striking agricultural progress and democratic decentralization, poverty and poverty-induced under-and malnutrition are widespread. International and national media refer to this situation as the co-existence of Ã¢â?¬Å?grain mountains and hungry millionsÃ¢â?¬?.

What should we regard as our major achievement when we commemorate the 60th anniversary of our Independence on the midnight of 14-15 August 2007? Obviously, it should be the ending of the unnecessary and unenviable reputation of India being the home of the largest number of under-fed children, women and men.

We can achieve this goal through a three-pronged strategy. First, we should introduce an open-ended Food Guarantee Scheme on 15 August 2007, combining the features of the Food for Work and Employment Guarantee Schemes. Second, we should help our farm and fisher families to enhance the productivity, profitability and sustainability of major farming systems through mutually reinforcing packages of pro-poor technologies, services and public policies. Third, we should enlarge opportunities for self-help groups, and other forms of group associations to take to market-driven non-farm enterprises, thereby accelerating livelihood opportunities in the rural non-farm sector.

All this will call for steps which can help us to mobilize concurrently scientific progress represented by the on-going biotechnology, digital, space and other technological revolutions and the social revolution represented by the 11th schedule of the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act relating to Panchayati Raj. We should intensify and deepen our efforts in the field of mobilizing the tools of molecular genetics for developing new strains of crops, forest trees, farm animals and fish. It imperative that we should incorporate in the crops cultivated along the coast, genes for resistance to abiotic stresses. I hope the 2nd Anniversary of BioSpectrum will mark the beginning of concerted efforts in our country to assess scientifically the risks and benefits associated with genetic engineering and biotechnology, so that our farm families are able to derive the maximum benefit from the new genetics.